



Author/Lead Officer of Report: Vicky Kennedy, Operations Manager

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Report of: Executive Director, Place
Report to: Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community Safety
Date of Decision: 1st March 2021
Subject: New Customer Engagement Strategy, 2021-2023

Is this a Key Decision? If Yes, reason Key Decision:- Yes No

- Expenditure and/or savings over £500,000
- Affects 2 or more Wards

Which Cabinet Member Portfolio does this relate to? **Neighbourhoods and Community Safety**

Which Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee does this relate to? **Safer and Stronger Communities**

Has an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) been undertaken? Yes No

If YES, what EIA reference number has it been given? To be allocated by the Equalities Team

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? Yes No

If YES, give details as to whether the exemption applies to the full report / part of the report and/or appendices and complete below:-

Purpose of Report:

To update the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community Safety on the development of the draft Customer Engagement Strategy and seek approval of the final Strategy as a statement of the Council's approach to customer engagement in its role as a social landlord, and of the accompanying action plan.

Recommendations:

That the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community Safety:

- Approves the Customer Engagement Strategy attached to this report as Appendix 1 as a statement of the Council's approach to customer engagement in its role as a social landlord.
- Approves the associated Initial Action Plan attached as Appendix 2.

Background Papers:

Appendix 1: Customer Engagement Strategy

Appendix 2: Initial Action Plan

Appendix 3: Task & Finish Group Terms of Reference

Appendix 4: National Tenant Engagement Standards (TPAS)

Appendix 5: Telephone Survey results

Appendix 6: Online Survey results

Appendix 7: TPAS report

Appendix 8: Equalities Impact Assessment

Lead Officer to complete:-		
1	I have consulted the relevant departments in respect of any relevant implications indicated on the Statutory and Council Policy Checklist, and comments have been incorporated / additional forms completed / EIA completed, where required.	Finance: Karen Jones
		Legal: Andrea Simpson
		Equalities: Louise Nunn
<i>Legal, financial/commercial and equalities implications must be included within the report and the name of the officer consulted must be included above.</i>		
2	EMT member who approved submission:	Mick Crofts
3	Cabinet Member consulted:	Cllr Paul Wood
4	I confirm that all necessary approval has been obtained in respect of the implications indicated on the Statutory and Council Policy Checklist and that the report has been approved for submission to the Decision Maker by the EMT member indicated at 2. In addition, any additional forms have been completed and signed off as required at 1.	
	Lead Officer Name: Vicky Kennedy	Job Title: Operations Manager, Future of Council Housing Team
	Date: tbc	

1. PROPOSAL

Background

- 1.1 Effective customer engagement is essential to the delivery of a high-quality council housing service. Sheffield City Council is committed to engaging with customers and invests a significant amount of resources into engagement activities. The activities of the Housing & Neighbourhoods Service are however not attracting an audience that is reflective of the tenant and leaseholder profile in the Council's housing. There is a heavy reliance on face-to-face meetings, which attract an older group of customers who are generally of a white British origin. We know we are failing to reach younger tenants and those from BME backgrounds. In addition, participation in activities continues to fall.
- 1.2 The Government emphasised the importance of resident engagement in its August 2018 Green Paper "A New Deal for Social Housing". This has recently been confirmed in the "The Charter for Social Housing Residents" Social Housing White Paper (2020), which states Government's expectations that landlords will improve tenant engagement and that the Regulator of Social Housing will require this from landlords. The Paper refers to landlords taking a much more tailored approach to engagement which better reflects the needs of different tenants, and to a requirement for landlords to demonstrate how they have sought and considered ways in which they can improve tenant engagement.
- 1.3 A new Engagement Strategy will be a first step in addressing the 'tenant voice' chapter of the White Paper, and will help ensure that we are already moving in the right direction when the Paper is implemented. There is already a requirement for the Council as a social landlord to comply with the Regulator of Social Housing's current 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment' standard; the proposals in this report demonstrate that compliance.
- 1.4 In July 2018 the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community Safety approved arrangements for Tenant Involvement and Engagement, but not a strategic approach. We do not currently have an Engagement Strategy in place unlike many other social landlords. Such a strategy would help to establish a clear approach to engagement and a cohesive 'direction of travel'. It would set out our plans for increasing the breadth and depth of our engagement activities to address some of the weaknesses identified above, as well as acting as a statement of intent and demonstrating to our customers the value that we place on involving them in shaping our services.

(Customers, for the purposes of this report, are defined as council housing tenants, leaseholders and applicants for council housing).

The draft Strategy

- 1.5 The draft Customer Engagement Strategy 2021 - 2023 is attached to this report as **Appendix 1**. It is a statement of the Council's approach to customer engagement in its role as a social landlord and focuses on five key elements in relation to customer engagement:
- **Priority One:** To provide easy and convenient access to information and engagement / involvement opportunities.

- **Priority Two:** To ensure that customers and their communities can influence what we do.
- **Priority Three:** To engage effectively with local people and communities to improve what we do.
- **Priority Four:** To make sure that all involved in our services recognise and value customer engagement
- **Priority Five:** To support and resource customer engagement work so that it delivers outcomes

The Action Plan

- 1.6** Attached to this report as **Appendix 2** is an initial draft Action Plan – a list of actions identified so far, split into ‘quick wins’ and ‘longer term’ categories. This is only an initial list – the action plan will be ever evolving as more ideas emerge, as more conversations are had with customers and staff and as more work is done at a corporate level around customer experience and the council’s digital offer.
- 1.7** The Action Plan makes a clear commitment to customers on how customer engagement will be improved and the Strategy will be implemented. Some of the actions listed have already been completed or can be initiated straight away whilst other work will need more and longer-term planning.
- 1.8** All actions listed in the Action Plan are aimed at achieving one or more of the above priorities and have been included because they are important in delivering on the commitments made in the Strategy.
- 1.9** Whilst at this stage the White Paper merely sets out the government’s future expectations, including what will be the subject of future legislation when parliamentary time permits, it is important that the Council as a social landlord begins planning now for how the new requirements once formalised will be met. So included in the Action Plan is an indication of how the actions listed will contribute to the Council’s response to relevant parts of the White Paper.

The Action Plan includes the following:

- 1.10**
- New methods of engagement with a focus on particular on digital / online channels to increase the diversity of the customers that we engage with. For example:
 - Online events / meetings (via Zoom, FaceBook live, etc)
 - More use of online surveys
 - Online discussion forum / panel(s)
 - Surveys via SMS texts

This action will increase the number of different ways in which the Housing & Neighbourhoods Service engages with customers. It will result in less reliance on (but not a complete move away from) face-to-face meetings, and make engagement more easily accessible and appealing to younger tenants and those unable / unwilling to attend such meetings.

- 1.11**
- A full review of formal tenant governance, including the Housing and Neighbourhoods Advisory Panel (HANAP), with a view to giving it a much stronger

scrutiny and assurance role.

Giving customers a much stronger and clearer channel through which to scrutinise our services and evaluate our performance will make us much more transparent and accountable. It will mean customers have sight of both where we are performing well and where not so well, and give them a voice with which to challenge us and hold us accountable for making improvements where needed.

HANAP was established following a decision by the Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods in March 2014 as an advisory body of tenants and leaseholders, replacing the governance structure of Sheffield Homes after council housing management had been brought back in-house. Any significant changes to the role of HANAP will be subject to a further executive decision made in accordance with the Leader's Scheme of Delegation.

- 1.12**
- A full review of 'Challenge for Change', to broaden involvement in that group and increase its effectiveness.

Challenge for Change is a customer led group which looks at different areas of the Housing Service, with the aim of letting the Council know what it does well and what it can improve. The group has carried out several reviews and produced a series of reports and recommendations for improvements which are presented to the Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee and published on the Council website.

This action is needed as the Challenge for Change Group has been run in its current format for a number of years and it is increasingly difficult to recruit new members. The current way it works requires a significant investment of time from the volunteers, and is difficult to balance with other commitments. This means a lot of customers are excluded or deterred from being involved. The Group has an important role to play, and is a useful vehicle for in-depth scrutiny of services, but needs to be accessible to a much wider range of people to ensure more views are heard and taken into account.

- 1.13**
- Encouraging Councillors to be more involved and strengthening the links between decision-makers and established engagement channels.

There is a strong feeling amongst many customers that the key decision-makers and Elected Members are not always as involved in engagement activities as perhaps they could be. Also that engagement structures do not link effectively with those of the decision-making process. This means that the tenant voice is not always heard by those decision-makers and lessens the influence our customers can have. So this action is needed to review how engagement activities can be better joined-up with the decision-makers.

The outcome may be a change to ways of working or the governance structure of the Housing & Neighbourhoods Service, and may also be dependent on any wider review of the Council's governance and decision-making structure.

- 1.14**
- Using the residual levy in a different way in those areas where we have no established TARA.

Tenant levy payments received from tenants where there is no active Tenants and Residents Association (TARA) are held by the Council in a 'residual levy' account. The monies in this account have accrued over the years and use of it has been the subject

of a number of executive decisions, most recently a decision of the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community Safety in July 2018 to establish a Residual Levy Community Fund, allocated to local area teams to grant-fund local priorities and ringfenced to the communities where it has been collected, with bids having to demonstrate that grants will be spent in and benefit the tenants of those communities.

This is an important action as the number of established TARAs is ever-reducing, meaning that more and more tenants do not have a TARA to represent them. We therefore cannot rely so heavily on TARAs when consulting with communities and when devising local projects to address local needs. We need to find a new channel through which to engage with those tenants living in an area with no TARA, and using the Residual Levy in a different way will help us to do that. Any changes to how the Residual Levy is spent will be subject to consultation with those tenants who pay the levy and a further executive decision.

1.15 • Refreshing our approach to the TARA Good Governance framework.

The ‘Good Governance Requirements’ for TARAs were approved by the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community Safety in July 2018 and replaced the previous TARA ‘Recognition Policy’. We want to empower and support our TARAs to be as effective as they can be in serving the communities they represent.

Feedback we have had from many of them about the Good Governance Framework is that it is too onerous and takes up too much of their valuable time – time they could be spending doing work with their communities instead. We want to work with our TARAs to refresh our approach to monitoring compliance with the Framework to minimise the work required of them. If this work results in a proposal to change the Good Governance Framework from that approved by the Cabinet Member in 2018 then it will be subject of a further executive decision.

2. HOW DOES THIS DECISION CONTRIBUTE ?

2.1 The main ambitions contained within the Corporate Plan to which this Strategy will contribute are:

- **“An in-touch organisation”**: Improved engagement with our customers, and ensuring a diverse range of individuals and groups interact with us, will help us design services which are better tailored to the changing needs of our customers. More effective engagement channels will help us to better to listen to the views of customers and respond to what they are telling us. A key objective of the Strategy is to help ensure that customers can access engagement activities in a way which suits them and their lifestyle.
- **“Thriving neighbourhoods and communities”**: The Strategy will support better engagement at a local level, with local people and the organisations who work to support them. It will help communities better influence how we deliver the services which matter most to them and in ways which will make most difference to our neighbourhoods.

3. HAS THERE BEEN ANY CONSULTATION?

- 3.1 There has been a great deal of consultation undertaken as part of the work to develop this Strategy. At the very outset, a Member-led Task and Finish Group (T&FG) was established to work with her on the project, consisting of 11 tenants, one leaseholder and three Councillors. The group's Terms of Reference are attached to this report as **Appendix 3**.
- 3.2 The T&FG based its work on the 6 'Standards of Engagement' set out by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS). TPAS are widely recognised as the national leaders in tenant engagement, and the Group were keen to use their standards to help guide their work. A summary of the standards is attached as **Appendix 4**.
- 3.3 The T&FG engaged with a wide and varied range of other tenants and leaseholders – through online, face-to-face and telephone surveys, and a series of independent focus groups / workshops.
- 3.4 The telephone survey was undertaken by ViewPoint, a local enterprise organisation. 146 people responded to the telephone survey, and the main barriers to engagement which they highlighted were work commitments, lack of time and medical / disability-related issues. This suggests that these customers need more flexible, convenient channels to engage with us. There was also a clear feeling amongst respondents that the Council does not listen to the views of customers. A full summary of the telephone survey results is attached as **Appendix 5**.
- 3.5 The same survey was also offered online, via the Council's online engagement tool CitizenSpace. 201 people responded to this, and again the main barriers to engagement which they flagged were work commitments, medical / disability issues and a feeling that the Council won't listen. This group, not surprisingly, also expressed a clear preference for online engagement channels. A full summary of the online survey results are attached in **Appendix 6**.
- 3.6 The T&FG also commissioned TPAS to undertake and report on a series of independent, focused workshops with customers and staff to better understand how engagement needs to be improved. The final report from TPAS is attached as **Appendix 7**. Their main recommendations, based on the outcomes of the workshops, include:
- Any new Strategy needs to reflect the vision and values of the Housing and Neighbourhoods Service (H&NS).
 - The H&NS should develop digital methods of engagement.
 - The role of the Housing and Neighbourhoods Advisory Panel (HANAP) should be reviewed, with a view to it becoming more focused on quality assurance.
 - Engagement activities should be outcome-focused.
- 3.7 After working together for seven months, taking into careful consideration all they had discussed, learned and heard from others over that time, the group agreed a list of elements to be included in the new engagement strategy and associated action plan. These elements were very much based on the outcomes of all the consultation outlined above. Officers then turned these agreed elements into the final Strategy document and the initial Action Plan outlining how the Strategy will be implemented.

4. RISK ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE DECISION

4.1 Equality of Opportunity Implications

4.1.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been undertaken as part of this project, and found that the Strategy is expected to have a positive impact on customers – particularly for younger tenants, those with a disability and those with carer responsibilities. This is due to the increased flexibility and convenience in engagement methods which the Strategy proposes. A copy of the full EIA is attached in **Appendix 8**.

4.2 Financial and Commercial Implications

4.2.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report. Any activities undertaken to implement and support the Strategy will be delivered within the existing budget for customer engagement.

4.2.2 The implementation of any proposals set out in the action plan may be subject to further decision making in accordance with the Leader's Scheme of Delegation, and the financial and commercial implications will be considered fully at that time.

4.3 Legal Implications

4.3.1 A local housing authority has general powers of management of its housing under section 21 of the Housing Act 1985. Tenant and leaseholder engagement, as outlined in this report and the attached Customer Engagement Strategy, facilitates the management of the Council's housing estates and so falls within the general power.

There are no other legal implications for the Council arising from this report. The implementation of some of the actions set out in the action plan may be the subject further executive decision making, and the legal implications will be considered fully at that time.

5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

5.1 An alternative option to adopting the proposed Strategy is to continue to undertake customer engagement in the same ways as we do now. This however would not achieve the increased level of engagement which the service needs in order to fully respond to the changing needs of its customers.

6. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 The H&NS needs to find ways to engage with a greater number and a more diverse range of customers. The Strategy and associated action plan set-out how this can be achieved.

6.2 The environment in which the Service is operating is ever-changing, and its engagement methods need to evolve and modernise to reflect this.